

Chapter One

She was only a scullery maid.

Nothing.

No one.

She was as unimportant as the scraps she cleaned up and just as forgettable. She had been inconsequential since the moment she arrived at The Bastion of Resolution and nothing would ever change that. She knew it and she expected nothing. Ever since she was twelve years old she understood that those around her were far better than she. Growing up in the presence of others far above her station, she had learned her life was trivial and meaningless; in comparison to those who made The Bastion their home she was nothing and she accepted this as fact.

As the long and tedious years passed, she grew into a young woman and her gangly, childish body matured into rounded curves and blushing tones. Although her heart longed for a connection with another, she understood that no one would ever turn their head to look at her. It was a heavy weight to bear, but she also understood it was much better that way. Her features were undeniably lovely, but with her chestnut-red hair pulled up tightly under her servant's cap, her body cloaked in dull gray, wrinkled servant's garments that were stained from over-use, and her hands cracked and reddened from exposure and hard labor she garnered no interest from those around her. No one looked closely enough to notice her and she had learned not to gaze wonderingly at anyone else. It was safer to go unnoticed.

Day in and day out she went about her tasks, toiling with heavy buckets of wash-water, scraping leavings from delicate china, scouring pots and pans, peeling countless vegetables, trimming succulent cuts of meat she would never taste, and crying from more than the onions she chopped, but she was only a scullery maid.

Nothing.

No one.

She was simply one of many who lived and breathed beneath the notice of those around them. Her betters were interesting, beautiful, wealthy, and above all, powerful. When they spoke, others rushed to serve. Where they wished to go, others made way. They were inaccessible and inescapable. Those who made the Bastion their home were the officers of the ruling faction, The Eminent Protectorate, and their families who outranked even the nobles of the land. No one questioned them. Ever. Those of the Eminent Protectorate were the elite of society and, in a world where poverty was common-place and where being healthy was a rare distinction among the masses, serving was a privilege most commoners could only dream of experiencing.

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Year 2446.

The 96th Year of the 4th Era after the Great Cataclysm

Le Bastion de la Résolution, - Marçais, New France

Nearly every night for the past year she heard the screams. When they first began, she'd cried herself to sleep for many nights, desperately trying not to hear them. After several nights of being forced to listen to them, she found herself leaning from her small window in the

servant's tower trying to locate their source, but the stone walls of The Bastion of Resolution, an ancient fortress the Eminent Protectorate had claimed as their headquarters, sent echoes scattering in all directions. Screams were not uncommon in this place, but these stole her sleep and broke her heart. She could not quite fathom why they should be more terrible than the many others she had heard throughout the years of her residence there, but they were far worse, somehow. Each night she sought their source and when she could not find it she offered a soft prayer for the one who suffered.

Now, after nearly a year of hearing them, she'd grown horrifyingly accustomed to the sound. It was not because they no longer tore at her heart, because they did, each night, every time. Now, however, she accepted them, just as she accepted her own plight. She knew there was nothing she could do for the one who suffered. She could not change their situation any more than she could change her own. Both of them had little choice other than to endure their predicament. Life at the hands of The Protectorate was, by its very nature, precarious. The Protectorate was above scrutiny and at liberty to do as they wished. They would not be questioned about screams of torture any more than they would be interrogated for their merciless governing policies or ruthlessness. Whoever the poor soul was who bore such brutal torment, they were doomed to continue suffering without any more hope of rescue than she might wish for.

Less.

Climbing the ten flights of circling stairs that led upward to her tiny tower chamber as she had done every night since she had been taken on by the Eminent Protectorate nearly ten years earlier, Lourdes nibbled on an apple she had found on the dining room floor after the officers and their families had finished their evening meal and retired. The food that touched the tables of the Eminent Protectorate was off limits, but servants were permitted to scavenge any of the day's leavings after the end of their shift, which was typically around ten o'clock at night. The only meals provided for servants were a small breakfast each morning at five and a meager supper twelve hours later, so, although scraps were just that, scraps, they were also a necessity.

Weary in body and numb of mind, she trudged up the slowly circling stairs in a haze of exhaustion. Her days were all the same, filled with labor and drudgery in an endless routine that had grown boring years ago, but she had no options. She was alone in the world; an orphan of no consequence who was suitable only for service. She had been fortunate to be given the chance to prove herself when she turned up at The Bastion. She was only twelve years old at the time and had no reference papers or identification of any kind, but they gave her a position as a scullery maid. It wasn't ideal, but she had very few choices, then or now. The Protectorate was her best option. Although a life of service was taxing, often in the extreme, things could be far worse. She could have been relegated to the life of a regimental whore, doomed to a brief and painful existence.

It was something she didn't like to think about.

Turning the handle of her chamber door, she clenched the apple between her teeth as she stepped inside and paused to light the candle waiting on a wooden crate placed beside the door for just such a purpose. When it glimmered dimly, she continued inward with the candleholder in one hand and the remnants of the apple in her other. The room was exceptionally dark. No moonlight shone through her small window from the cloud-filled sky above and she squinted into the darkness to find her way. Setting the candle down upon her table, which was little more than a few boards tied together with old twine supported by four

logs she had managed to acquire before they were split for kindling, she took another bite of the apple and moved toward the window. It was a humid, summer night; sultry with little air moving, but any breath of breeze would help cool her and make her small room more comfortable for sleeping. Pushing the ancient shutters of The Bastion window further open to receive whatever air the night had to offer, she stood for a moment with closed eyes, listening.

Quiet.

“That’s odd,” she murmured and then she nearly choked. Quiet because there were no screams. “Oh, God!” She knew what silence meant and, despite the fact that she had never met, nor even seen the one for whom she quietly mourned, she bowed her head briefly. There was so little love left in the world, only hatred and fear, avarice and ambition. Although she didn’t know anything about the one who was so unexpectedly silent, she offered a wordless thought of peace for them before she turned from the window to gaze around her room. Though her world was humble, it was at least secure. No one ever came to hammer on her door to force their way inward. No one ever demanded anything other than what her duties as a scullery maid dictated and, for that, she was exceptionally thankful. Keeping her hair pulled up in a tight, unattractive knot and wearing clothes that were over-large and unkempt hid her features from curious and unwanted gazers, and ensured her safety.

Gazing around her small chambers, she realized it wasn’t much of a world. Not really. All she had was one small table, a deep windowsill below a small window, a minuscule fireplace large enough for only two logs and a kettle, a rope-framed cot with a straw-filled mattress, a solitary washstand, a handful of crockery and a few uniforms. It wasn’t much at all, but she realized it was far more than many enjoyed in a world where poverty was common and comfort was rare. Below, in the great halls of The Bastion, luxury and comfort abounded. Lavish carpets and ornate wall-hangings proclaimed the affluence of The Protectorate. Fine linen draperies bedecked the many broad windows; silver and crystal adorned the over-sized tables, and silks and soft linens clothed the fortunate. Clean running water was pumped through elaborate systems whenever desired; food was plentiful to fill the bellies of the privileged and safety was never questioned. Those of the Eminent Protectorate had more than enough of whatever they wanted, while she and so many like her had....

A chilling scream echoed from the bulwarks and she twisted in surprise, staring out the window with sudden trepidation. The cry hung on the thick, summer air as if the one who gave it voice was standing just outside. She listened in breathless dismay, dreading the silence she expected to follow as much as she feared another scream. Death would have been far better than the endless torture the poor soul endured. It was a harsh thought, but how they survived such torment was beyond her comprehension; it seemed impossible. Several moments passed. The stillness of the dark night was consumed by the hammering of her heart while she waited. Anxiety twisted within her until she was made nearly sick by it; then, another scream pierced the blackness that was even more blood-curdling than the first.

“What are they doing to you?” Unexpected tears slipped from her distinctive, caramel-hued eyes and she moved suddenly to close the window, hoping to drown out the harrowing screams, but the weather-worn shutters barely held the elements at bay and could not silence such piercing cries. As she stood in the center of her small room, the heartless action she had taken weighed on her like a heavy millstone. She couldn’t bear the sense that she’d shut out the very one who needed her compassion the most and forced them into an insolation even greater than what they already endured. After several agonizing moments, she turned back and opened the shutters

once more, staring out into the darkness as she searched the ramparts, avenues, and walls with guilt-ridden desperation.

“I’m so sorry. If you can bear it, I can bear it. You’re not alone.” Her whispered sympathy drifted into the sultry night, but only the distant drone of machinery from the mines of Le Châtelet answered her and, after what felt like hours, she finally turned away. “I’ve got to sleep. I hope you are too.” Finishing the apple with a knot in her stomach that made her feel queasy rather than satisfied, she peeled off her uniform, gave it a generous powdering with scented talcum, shook it vigorously and hung it beside the window to refresh. Water was a valuable commodity and servants were only permitted to do their laundry once each week, so she had to make the best of the four uniforms and three aprons she had been provided. Blowing out her candle, she trod wearily to her cot and lay down with a heavy sigh.

Tired.

So Tired.

She wasn’t sure if she had just closed her eyes or if she had been asleep for hours, but she was awakened by another shrill scream that brought tears to her eyes even before she opened them. Not just one, not this time. This time the screams continued, one after the other, until the sound was like a blade burying itself inside her. Covering her ears in a futile attempt to keep herself from hearing, she was only successful in muffling the repeated, agonized cries. Shaking her head with an inability to comprehend such cruelty and deep remorse at being unable to help in any way, she sat listening until she couldn’t bear the horrifying screams another moment. Lunging up from her bed, she rushed to the window and shouted in anger.

“Stop hurting him! You horrible monsters!” The second the words flew from her lips, she clamped her hand across her mouth in terror. Was she a fool? If anyone heard her outburst, she could lose her position and be flung out into the poverty of the crumbling city around The Bastion. Or worse, she could be handed over to the garrison commanders as punishment. The thought sent a shudder over her more terrifying than his screams.

Standing in appalled silence as his cries faded into hoarse wails that lingered on the heavy night air like an apparition, she felt insane with helpless desperation. Scanning the walls and battlements again, though she had searched them numerous times before, she sought the place from which his cries emanated. It wouldn’t really matter if she discovered their source. There was nothing she could do for him, but she felt compelled to find him.

So many other nights when she stood in her window listening to his heartbreaking anguish, moonlight had brightened the dark stonework and no interior lights emanated from within the fortress to betray his location, but tonight no moon shone. Tonight, as his wails echoed across the ramparts, she spied a dim sliver of orange torchlight near the base of the tower that stood opposite and to the left of hers. Tonight, she looked down on the place where his voice called to her heart and she shuddered.

It was a place none were permitted to venture. Only those with the highest levels of clearance or servants with specific assignments could enter the gates and tunnels of Tower Obligar. It was a place none wished to go because it was where The Protectorate housed and tortured their prisoners. It was a place she couldn’t possibly penetrate.

But she had to.

Somehow.

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Year 2445.

The 95th Year of the 4th Era after the Great Cataclysm

The Coast of Calais, New France

He stood on the ocean shore, his back to what was left of a once vibrant landscape as his brilliant, violet gaze searched the empty miles of ocean before him. His essence listened for any sign of life, a heartbeat remaining among the silence of the deeps, but barely a single pulse broke the deathly hush. Humanity had caused a cataclysm entirely on its own. So much of what was once beautiful, colorful and diverse was gone.

The seas had died.

The thought pained him and he closed his eyes, bowing his head to mourn what had been sacrificed and all that had been lost. Upon this lonely shore no terns cried on the ocean breeze and no laughing gulls sang praise to the skies; there was only the sound of the waves rushing and breaking upon the stones of the beach and the hollow moan of the wind. Without wings to dance upon it, the air itself seemed bereft and grief-stricken. In this languishing part of the world the song of the lark didn't cheer the entrance of the day and the carol of the robin didn't serenade the evening. The only songs that remained in this place, where pollutants had poisoned the waterways and decimated the once thriving eco-system, were the reverberations of countless insects. These thrived in the predator-less environment to the point of becoming their own form of pestilence and he cocked his gaze at the swarm of flying vermin dancing only a few yards from him.

The ruddy glimmer of the late day sun, slowly fading into a crimson haze behind the distant clouds, played through the layers of his shoulder-length blonde hair and sparkled across the perfection of his features. He was neither rugged nor boyish, but strikingly handsome. His physique was tall and powerful, but not burly and his appearance was undeniably beautiful while still masculine. Black pants and a deep gray shirt accentuated his trim build as well as the vivid color of his eyes and he wore a gray leather harness across his back with a scabbard to carry a sword, though the weapon was currently sheathed in the scabbard at his hip. He bore no scars of any kind and wore around his neck an amethyst crystal upon a silver chain. The deep violet of the unworked stone matched the color of his eyes precisely and glowed faintly as if it contained an internal light. Standing there upon the vast ocean shore, he was the most stunning sight for countless miles.

Behind him, a thunder of hooves pounded across the beach and the coarse profanities of men accosted the quietness. He didn't turn to face them as they formed a perimeter around him, barricading him against the sea, nor did he immediately answer when they demanded to know who he was. Instead, he closed his violet eyes and sighed wearily. Nothing had changed, even after three horrendous cataclysms had shaken the foundations of the world, hatred, suspicion, and fear still ruled those who remained.

"He has a weapon, Sir!" one shouted with officious zeal.

"Shall we disarm him?" another offered eagerly.

"It's only a sword," a third supplied with obvious disinterest.

"Swords are as deadly as guns when wielded correctly."

He listened as they debated, their French accents painting their words, and his thoughts tangled in a maelstrom of compassion and exasperation. They were so tied to their militant ways they couldn't see the opportunity standing before them.

“Turn around slow and put your weapon on the ground.”

The command came from one who had not yet spoken and he looked down at the scabbard of black leather and shimmering silver that hung from the belt encircling his hips, contemplating his options.

“I said, turn around.”

The one addressing him had a tone of authority and impatience the others didn't. Raising his hand slowly, he reached for the hilt of his sword.

“Don't be a fool. There's a full regiment of weapons trained on you. Turn slow and drop that sword.”

He drew the blade from its scabbard, the finely polished silver glittering in the late day light as he turned to face them, but he didn't immediately drop it. Looking at each of them with a vigilant, piercing gaze, he assessed their ranks with the leisure of one thoroughly assured of his position. The one he presumed to be the captain of the regiment urged his mount forward and glared down at him, his tone growing more aggressive. “You don't really think you can take us, do you?”

Looking up at the officer with an undaunted stare, he could see clearly that his self-assurance infuriated the man. “It is not within the scope of my purpose to ‘take’ you.” His poised reply and speech that held no distinct accent caused the captain to grind his teeth with annoyance.

Turning in his saddle, the officer shouted belligerently to those who were mere yards away. “If he makes any threatening move, shoot him.”

Several bold “Aye, Sir's” answered as the officer turned back to glare down at him again. “This isn't a battle you'll likely win. Just lay that sword down and come along with us quietly.”

Looking up at the man with an unreadable expression, the beautiful blond stranger studied the officer who was visibly older than the others in his unit. He had permanent creases around his eyes and mouth and deep furrows in his brow to attest to his wealth of experience, but there was hostility in his dark brown eyes. The stranger shook his head.

“Coming along with you is not my purpose either.”

At his indifferent response, the officer's eyes narrowed and he glared at him silently, his anger noticeably mounting. The stranger could sense his hatred of him in the essence of what he was, even though they had never faced one another previously. Standing his ground, he said nothing more, but waited on the officer's next actions.

“What's your name, son?” Attempting to shift tactics, the officer spoke with an openly condescending tone, but he only succeeded in providing the stranger with another opportunity to annoy him.

“I am no more your son than these stones.” His persistent self-control dissolved the officer's patience and he shouted with ire.

“What is your name?”

Sighing again as if the entire situation was dimly tedious, he closed his violet eyes and relented. “I am Tzadkiel.”

When he heard the name, the officer's eyes widened with recognition and, without a moment's hesitation, he raised his gun and fired until he had fully discharged his weapon. He watched the stranger stagger backward and fall to his knees, but he didn't collapse, not initially, and as he gasped for breath and groaned in prodigious agony, the officer observed him with callous interest.

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Daylight faded rapidly as the sun slipped behind the gray ocean, sending up a final radiant stream of scarlet vibrancy before disappearing. Soldiers milled about in small groups, waiting with palpable curiosity as the captain of the regiment and his lieutenant discussed their captive. Standing over him with calm disregard, they debated their options as he bled into the sand.

“He’s still alive, Sir. Shouldn’t we finish the job?” Lieutenant Delacour was a young officer just recently promoted to serve with Captain Sébastien Lévesque. He was youthfully handsome, almost to a fault, with platinum blond hair and a smattering of freckles across his fine features. He kept a day’s growth of scruff on his chin and upper lip to offset his otherwise boyish good looks and had a scar across one bright blond brow that stood out in stark contrast to his fair complexion. Looking up at Lévesque uncertainly, he waited for his anticipated, curt reply. He was not an officer to be trifled with and had a reputation for strict adherence to protocol, as well as a notoriously bad temper. As expected, he glared at his subordinate irritably.

“You suppose fifteen bullets weren’t enough?” Lévesque’s sarcasm caused Delacour to look down at their hostage and shake his head.

“Should have been.” As soon as the remark passed his lips, he turned back to his commanding officer and apologized. “Sorry, Sir. I’m stating the obvious. What I meant was why is he still alive?”

Lévesque nodded, “Why, indeed.” He walked around the fallen man, watching him bleed and listening to his labored and rasping breaths with heartless detachment. “Have you never heard the name Tzadkiel before?”

The younger man shook his head, but remained silent. Circling all the way around without once showing a hint of concern over the distress his captive suffered, Lévesque returned to his lieutenant and leaned closer to impart the information he was about to share as surreptitiously as possible. “Archangel.”

Delacour’s gray eyes widened with astonishment and he looked down at their hostage with a new and potent combination of hatred and fear twisting his features.

“What’ll we do with him?” he asked with similar caution, stepping back from the fallen Archangel as if at any moment he might leap up, entirely healed, and attack. After a moment’s contemplation, Lévesque turned and began issuing orders in a loud voice for all to hear.

“Transfer the ordinance from that supply wagon to the pack horses. Attach ankle and wrist restraints to the bed of the wagon, then bring it here.” Turning back to Delacour, he continued so only he could hear. “We’ll take him back to The Bastion.”

Delacour stepped back from the Archangel another time, his voice clearly betraying his concern. “Alive, Sir?” His anxiety was ignored.

“He won’t be for long.”

Long into the night the troop marched for Marçais, their prisoner lying in a pain-ridden, semi-conscious state in the back of the supply wagon, which had been converted into his prison cell. They had secured him to the wagon with leather restraints that had been hurriedly nailed into the sides of the conveyance, but they were entirely unnecessary. He could barely breathe, let alone fight to escape. Delacour had been assigned to the wagon and ordered to keep strict watch over him, either to confirm his demise when and if that actually occurred or to report on his condition when they stopped for the night. His attention was, at first, unwavering; his

curiosity riveted by the creature straight out of the history books he'd studied as a child. An Archangel, a being of supposed consummate power and strength, lay at his feet.

Bleeding.

The thought was as sobering as it was astonishing. Had any of his ancestors known how easily the Archangels were injured, perhaps the catastrophes they had unleashed would not have occurred, but Delacour had never been a keen student of history or a philosophical thinker. He was a soldier, through and through, designed to obey orders and follow routines. Besides, the onset of the Great Cataclysm was nearly 400 years in the past, so as the hours dragged on and the Archangel remained motionless with the exception of the spasmodic coughs that intermittently wracked his body, Delacour's curiosity waned and his head began to nod.

When around the middle of the night the order was finally called to stop, the weary soldiers made a hasty camp and guards were posted around the perimeter. Many went straight to bed, not bothering to wait for their evening rations and unconcerned about their captive who clung to life with unprecedented tenacity despite his repeated groans of pain, rasping breaths, and blood-spattered coughing. Leaping down from the wagon after making a final inspection of his condition, Delacour hastened to give his report in the hope of being released to retire, but Captain Lévesque had other plans. Calling for torches, he ordered his exhausted lieutenant to return to the prisoner's wagon, following him in a state of mounting agitation and yanking the wagon gait down impatiently when they reached it. He stared at their hostage for several moments, silently considering his options.

Around them, the moonless night echoed with the trills and trebles of innumerable insects and Lévesque raised his head to glare into the raucous darkness with even greater irritation. Shadows infiltrated the spaces between the many fires that had been built throughout the camp and from that spectral realm a youthful mess-hand in a disheveled uniform and scraggly red hair peeking out from under his cap appeared like an apparition. He nodded respectfully to the officers and held out two small canvas bags that buzzed with muffled life. The captain and lieutenant looked at them, recognizing the rations of high-protein insect-replacement nourishment with similar expressions of disgust, but Delacour was hungry and took one of the pouches with a turn of his lip. Lévesque growled, his anger escalating when the subordinate held the other bag out to him. It was more than he could bear. Bounding up onto the bed of the wagon, he stalked towards his captive, glared down on him mercilessly, and snarled.

"If it weren't for your kind this world wouldn't be in the state it's in and I wouldn't be eating insects to survive!" Drawing back, he kicked his semi-conscious prisoner in the side brutally, watching with vicious satisfaction as blood spurted from his mouth and he curled in pain. Crouching down beside him, he gazed with avarice at the crystal he wore around his neck. He grasped the chain and yanked on it viciously, but despite the force he exerted the chain held. Tzadkiel looked up at him with an irritated glare.

"You cannot...have that." His voice was a deep growl that was made guttural by his injuries. Lévesque raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Can I not?" Dubious of the fact, he yanked on it even more forcefully, but only succeeded in driving the fine metal chain into his skin. Cursing, he released the amulet and pressed his hand against Tzadkiel's throat instead, listening to his splutters for breath with satisfaction before hissing with deliberate cruelty. "It seems the reports are accurate. Your kind may be immortal, but you suffer pain just like we human's do."

Tzadkiel looked up at his captor with an alarmed stare, a wave of genuine fear washing over him for only the second time in his long life. Shaken, he listened as the captain patted his shoulder with feigned compassion and leaned in closer to convey his next words in a cold, sadistic whisper.

“Be assured, Archangel, we may not be able to kill you, but you’ll wish we could before long.”